

EXHIBIT A

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crave



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TRACY WOLFF

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c r a y e



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TRACY WOLFF

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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*For My Boys,
Who Have Always Believed in Me
and
For Stephanie,
Who Helped Me Believe in Myself Again.*

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If You're Not Living on the Edge, You're Taking Up Too Much Space

I stand at the outer tarmac door staring at the plane I am about to get on and try my hardest not to freak out.

It's easier said than done.

Not just because I'm about to leave behind everything I know, though up until two minutes ago, that *was* my main concern. Now, though, as I stare at this plane that I'm not even sure deserves the dignity of being called a plane, a whole new level of panic is setting in.

"So, Grace." The man my uncle Finn sent to pick me up looks down at me with a patient smile. Philip, I think he said his name was, but I can't be sure. It's hard to hear him over the wild beating of my heart. "Are you ready for an adventure?"

No. No, I am *not* the least bit ready—for an adventure or anything else that's about to come my way.

If you had told me a month ago that I would be standing on the outskirts of an airport in Fairbanks, Alaska, I would've said that you were misinformed. And if you had told me that the whole reason I was in Fairbanks was to catch the tiniest puddle jumper in existence to what feels like the very edge of the world—or, in this case, a town on the edge of Denali, the

highest mountain in North America—I would have said that you were high as a freaking kite.

But a lot can change in thirty days. And even more can get ripped away.

In fact, the only thing I *have* been able to count on these past few weeks is that no matter how bad things are, they can always get worse...

Landing Is Just Throwing Yourself at the Ground and Hoping You Don't Miss

“**T**here she is,” Philip says as we clear the peaks of several mountains, taking one hand off the steering column to point to a small collection of buildings in the distance. “Healy, Alaska. Home sweet home.”

“Oh, wow. It looks...” Tiny. It looks really, really tiny. Way smaller than just my neighborhood in San Diego, let alone the whole city.

Then again, it's pretty hard to see much of anything from up here. Not because of the mountains that loom over the area like long-forgotten monsters but because we're in the middle of a weird kind of haze that Philip refers to as “civil twilight” even though it's barely five o'clock. Still, I can see well enough to make out that the so-called town he's pointing at is full of mismatched buildings randomly grouped together.

I finally settle on, “Interesting. It looks...interesting.”

It's not the first description that popped into my head—no, that was the old cliché that hell has actually frozen over—but it is the most polite one as Philip drops even lower, preparing for what I'm pretty sure will be yet another harrowing incident in the list of harrowing incidents that have plagued me since I got

on the first of three planes ten hours ago.

Sure enough, I've only just spotted what passes for an airport in this one-thousand-person town (thank you, Google) when Philip says, "Hang on, Grace. It's a short runway because it's hard to keep a long one clear of snow or ice for any amount of time out here. It's going to be a quick landing."

I have no idea what a "quick landing" means, but it doesn't sound good. So I grab the bar on the plane door, which I'm pretty sure exists for just this very reason, and hold on tight as we drop lower and lower.

"Okay, kid. Here goes nothing!" Philip tells me. Which, by the way, definitely makes the top five things you don't *ever* want to hear your pilot say while you're still in the air.

The ground looms white and unyielding below us, and I squeeze my eyes shut.

Seconds later, I feel the wheels skip across the ground. Then Philip hits the brakes hard enough to slam me forward so fast that my seat belt is the only thing keeping my head from meeting the control panel. The plane whines—not sure what part of it is making that horrendous noise or if it's a collective death knell—so I choose not to focus on it.

Especially when we start skidding to the left.

I bite my lip, keep my eyes squeezed firmly shut even as my heart threatens to burst out of my chest. If this is the end, I don't need to see it coming.

The thought distracts me, has me wondering just what my mom and dad might have seen coming, and by the time I shut down that line of thinking, Philip has the plane sliding to a shaky, shuddering halt.

I know exactly how it feels. Right now, even my toes are trembling.

I peel my eyes open slowly, resisting the urge to pat myself

down to make sure I really am still in one piece. But Philip just laughs and says, “Textbook landing.”

Maybe if that textbook is a horror novel. One he’s reading upside down and backward.

I don’t say anything, though. Just give him the best smile I can manage and grab my backpack from under my feet. I pull out the pair of gloves Uncle Finn sent me and put them on. Then I push open the plane door and jump down, praying the whole time that my knees will support me when I hit the ground.

They do, just barely.

After taking a few seconds to make sure I’m not going to crumble—and to pull my brand-new coat more tightly around me because it’s literally about eight degrees out here—I head to the back of the plane to get the three suitcases that are all that is left of my life.

I feel a pang looking at them, but I don’t let myself dwell on everything I had to leave behind, any more than I let myself dwell on the idea of strangers living in the house I grew up in. After all, who cares about a house or art supplies or a drum kit when I’ve lost so much more?

Instead, I grab a bag out of what passes for the tiny airplane’s cargo hold and wrestle it to the ground. Before I can reach for the second, Philip is there, lifting my other two suitcases like they’re filled with pillows instead of everything I own in the world.

“Come on, Grace. Let’s go before you start to turn blue out here.” He nods toward a parking lot—not even a *building*, just a parking lot—about two hundred yards away, and I want to groan. It’s so cold out that now I’m shaking for a whole different reason. How can anyone live like this? It’s unreal, especially considering it was seventy degrees where I woke up this morning.

There’s nothing to do but nod, though, so I do. Then grab onto the handle of my suitcase and start dragging it toward a

small patch of concrete that I'm pretty sure passes for an airport in Healy. It's a far cry from San Diego's bustling terminals.

Philip overtakes me easily, a large suitcase dangling from each hand. I start to tell him that he can pull the handles out and roll them, but the second I step off the runway and onto the snowy ground that surrounds it in all directions, I figure out why he's carrying them—it's pretty much impossible to roll a heavy suitcase over snow.

I'm near frozen by the time we make it halfway to the (thankfully still plowed) parking lot, despite my heavy jacket and synthetic fur-lined gloves. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do from here, how I'm supposed to get to the boarding school my uncle is headmaster of, so I turn to ask Philip if Uber is even a thing up here. But before I can get a word out, someone steps from behind one of the pickup trucks in the lot and rushes straight toward me.

I think it's my cousin, Macy, but it's hard to tell, considering she's covered from head to toe in protective weather gear.

"You're here!" the moving pile of hats, scarves, and jackets says, and I was right—it's definitely Macy.

"I'm here," I agree dryly, wondering if it's too late to reconsider foster care. Or emancipation. Any living situation in San Diego has got to be better than living in a town whose airport consists of one runway and a tiny parking lot. Heather is going to die when I text her.

"Finally!" Macy says, reaching out for a hug. It's a little awkward, partly because of all the clothes she's wearing and partly because—despite being a year younger than my own seventeen years—she's about eight inches taller than I am. "I've been waiting for more than an hour."

I hug her back but let go quickly as I answer. "Sorry, my plane was late from Seattle. The storm there made it hard to take off."

“Yeah, we hear that a lot,” she tells me with a grimace. “Pretty sure their weather is even worse than ours.”

I want to argue—miles of snow and enough protective gear to give astronauts pause seem pretty freaking awful to me. But I don’t know Macy all that well, despite the fact that we’re cousins, and the last thing I want to do is offend her. Besides Uncle Finn and now Philip, she is the only other person I know in this place.

Not to mention the only family I have left.

Which is why, in the end, I just shrug.

It must be a good enough answer, though, because she grins back at me before turning to Philip, who is still carrying my suitcases. “Thanks so much for picking her up, Uncle Philip. Dad says to tell you he owes you a case of beer.”

“No worries, Mace. Had to run a few errands in Fairbanks anyway.” He says it so casually, like hopping in a plane for a couple-hundred-mile round-trip journey is no big deal. Then again, out here where there’s nothing but mountains and snow in all directions, maybe it’s not. After all, according to Wikipedia, Healy has only one major road in and out of it, and in the winter sometimes even that gets closed down.

I’ve spent the last month trying to imagine what that looks like. What it *is* like.

I guess I’m about to find out.

“Still, he says he’ll be around Friday with that beer so you guys can watch the game in true bro-mance style.” She turns to me. “My dad’s really upset he couldn’t make it out to pick you up, Grace. There was an emergency at the school that no one else could deal with. But he told me to get him the second we make it back.”

“No worries,” I tell her. Because what else am I supposed to say? Besides, if I’ve learned anything in the month since my parents died, it’s just how little most things matter.

Who cares who picks me up as long as I get to the school?

Who cares where I live if it's not going to be with my mom and dad?

Philip walks us to the edge of the cleared parking lot before finally letting go of my suitcases. Macy gives him a quick hug goodbye, and I shake his hand, murmur, "Thanks for coming to get me."

"Not a problem at all. Any time you need a flight, I'm your man." He winks, then heads back to the tarmac to deal with his plane.

We watch him go for a couple of seconds before Macy grabs the handles on both suitcases and starts rolling them across the tiny parking lot. She gestures for me to do the same with the one I'm holding on to, so I do, even though a part of me wants nothing more than to run back onto the tarmac with Philip, climb back into that tiny plane, and demand to be flown back to Fairbanks. Or, even better, back home to San Diego.

It's a feeling that only gets worse when Macy says, "Do you need to pee? It's a good ninety-minute ride to the school from here."

Ninety minutes? That doesn't seem possible when the whole town looks like we could drive it in fifteen, maybe twenty minutes at the most. Then again, when we were flying over, I didn't see any building remotely big enough to be a boarding school for close to four hundred teenagers, so maybe the school isn't actually in Healy.

I can't help but think of the mountains and rivers that surround this town in all directions and wonder where on earth I'm going to end up before this day is through. And where exactly she expects me to pee out here anyway.

"I'm okay," I answer after a minute, even as my stomach somersaults and pitches nervously.

This whole day has been about getting here, and that was bad

enough. But as we roll my suitcases through the semi-darkness, the well-below-freezing air slapping at me with each step we take, everything gets surreal, superfast. Especially when Macy walks through the entire parking lot to the *snowmobile* parked just beyond the edge of the pavement.

At first, I think she's joking around, but then she starts loading my suitcases onto the attached sled and it occurs to me that this is really happening. I'm really about to ride a snowmobile in the near dark through *Alaska* in weather that is more than *twenty degrees below freezing*, if the app on my phone can be believed.

All that's missing is the wicked witch cackling that she's going to get me and my little dog, too. Then again, at this point, that would probably be redundant.

I watch with a kind of horrified fascination as Macy straps my suitcases to the sled. I should probably offer to help, but I wouldn't even know where to begin. And since the last thing I want is for the few belongings I have left in the world to be strewn across the side of a mountain, I figure if there was ever a time to leave things to the experts, this is it.

"Here, you're going to need these," Macy tells me, opening up the small bag that was already strapped to the sled when we got out here. She rummages around for a second before pulling out a pair of heavy snow pants and a thick wool scarf. They are both hot pink, my favorite color when I was a kid but not so much now. Still, it's obvious Macy remembered that from the last time I saw her, and I can't help being touched as she holds them out to me.

"Thanks." I give her the closest thing to a smile I can manage.

After a few false starts, I manage to pull the pants on over the thermal underwear and fleece pajama pants with emojis on them (the only kind of fleece pants I own) that I put on at my uncle's instruction before boarding the plane in Seattle. Then I take a

long look at the way Macy's rainbow-colored scarf is wrapped around her neck and face and do the same thing with mine.

It's harder than it looks, especially trying to get it positioned well enough to keep it from sliding down my nose the second I move.

Eventually, I manage it, though, and that's when Macy reaches for one of the helmets draped over the snowmobile's handles.

"The helmet is insulated, so it will help keep you warm as well as protect your head in case of a crash," she instructs. "Plus, it's got a shield to protect your eyes from the cold air."

"My eyes can freeze?" I ask, more than a little traumatized, as I take the helmet from her and try to ignore how hard it is to breathe with the scarf over my nose.

"Eyes don't freeze," Macy answers with a little laugh, like she can't help herself. "But the shield will keep them from watering and make you more comfortable."

"Oh, right." I duck my head as my cheeks heat up. "I'm an idiot."

"No you're not." Macy wraps an arm around my shoulders and squeezes tight. "Alaska is a lot. Everyone who comes here has a learning curve. You'll figure it all out soon enough."

I'm not holding my breath on that one—I can't imagine that this cold, foreign place will ever feel familiar to me—but I don't say anything. Not when Macy has already done so much to try and make me feel welcome.

"I'm really sorry you had to come here, Grace," she continues after a second. "I mean, I'm really excited that you're here. I just wish it wasn't because..." Her voice drifts off before she finishes the sentence. But I'm used to that by now. After weeks of having my friends and teachers tiptoe around me, I've learned that no one wants to say the words.

Still, I'm too exhausted to fill in the blanks. Instead, I slip my head in the helmet and secure it the way Macy showed me.

"Ready?" she asks once I've got my face and head as protected as they're going to get.

The answer hasn't changed since Philip asked me that same question in Fairbanks. *Not even close*. "Yeah. Absolutely."

I wait for Macy to climb on the snowmobile before getting on behind her.

"Hold on to my waist!" she shouts as she turns it on, so I do. Seconds later, we're speeding into the darkness that stretches endlessly in front of us.

I've never been more terrified in my life.

2

Just Because You Live in a Tower Doesn't Make You a Prince

The ride isn't as bad as I thought it would be.

I mean, it's not good, but that has more to do with the fact that I've been traveling all day and I just want to get someplace—anyplace—where I can stay longer than a layover. Or a really long snowmobile ride.

And if that place also happens to be warm and devoid of the local wildlife I can hear howling in the distance, then I'm all about it. Especially since everything south of my waist seems to have fallen asleep...

I'm in the middle of trying to figure out how to wake up my very numb butt when we suddenly veer off the trail (and I mean "trail" in the loosest sense of the word) we've been following and onto a kind of plateau on the side of the mountain. It's as we wind our way through yet another copse of trees that I finally see lights up ahead.

"Is that Katmere Academy?" I shout.

"Yeah." Macy lays off the speed a little, steering around trees like we're on a giant slalom course. "We should be there in about five minutes."

Thank God. Much longer out here and I might actually lose

a toe or three, even with my doubled-up wool socks. I mean, everyone knows Alaska is cold, but can I just say—it's freaking *cold*, and I was *not* prepared.

Yet another roar sounds in the distance, but as we finally clear the thicket of trees, it's hard to pay attention to anything but the huge building looming in front of us, growing closer with every second that passes.

Or should I say the huge *castle* looming in front of us, because the dwelling I'm looking at is nothing like a modern building. And absolutely nothing like any school I have *ever* seen. I tried to Google it before I got here, but apparently Katmere Academy is so elite even Google hasn't heard of it.

First of all, it's big. Like, really big...and sprawling. From here it looks like the brick wall in front of the castle stretches halfway around the mountain.

Second, it's elegant. Like, really, really elegant, with architecture I've only heard described in my art classes before. Vaulted arches, flying buttresses, and giant, ornate windows dominate the structure.

And third, as we get closer, I can't help wondering if my eyes are deceiving me or if there are gargoyles—*actual gargoyles*—protruding from the top of the castle walls. I know it's just my imagination, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't half expect to see Quasimodo waiting for us when we finally get there.

Macy pulls up to the huge gate at the front of the school and enters a code. Seconds later, the gate swings open. And we're on our way again.

The closer we get, the more surreal everything feels. Like I'm trapped in a horror movie or Salvador Dalí painting. *Katmere Academy may be a Gothic castle, but at least there's no moat*, I tell myself as we break through one last copse of trees. *And no fire-breathing dragon guarding the entrance*. Just a long, winding

driveway that looks like every other prep school driveway I've ever seen on TV—except for the fact that it's covered in snow. Big shock. And leads right up to the school's huge, incredibly ornate front doors.

Antique doors.

Castle doors.

I shake my head to clear it. I mean, what even is my life right now?

“Told you it wouldn't be bad,” Macy says as she pulls up to the front with a spray of snow. “We didn't even see a caribou, let alone a wolf.”

She's right, so I just nod and pretend I'm not completely overwhelmed.

Pretend like my stomach isn't tied into knots and my whole world hasn't turned upside down for the second time in a month.

Pretend like I'm okay.

“Let's bring your suitcases up to your room and get you unpacked. It'll help you relax.”

Macy climbs off the snowmobile, then takes off her helmet and her hat. It's the first time I've seen her without all the cold-weather gear, and I can't help smiling at her rainbow-colored hair. It's cut in a short, choppy style that should be smooshed and plastered to her head after three hours in a helmet, but instead it looks like she just walked out of a salon.

Which matches the rest of her, now that I think about it, considering her whole coordinating jacket, boots, and snow pants look kind of shouts cover model for some Alaskan wilderness fashion magazine.

On the other hand, I'm pretty sure my look says I've gone a couple of rounds with a pissed-off caribou. And lost. Badly. Which seems fair, since that's about how I feel.

Macy makes quick work of unloading my suitcases, and this

time I grab two of them. But I only make it a few steps up the very long walk to the castle's imposing front doors before I'm struggling to breathe.

"It's the altitude," Macy says as she takes one of the suitcases out of my hand. "We climbed pretty fast and, since you're coming from sea level, it's going to take a few days for you to get used to how thin the air is up here."

Just the idea of not being able to breathe sets off the beginnings of the panic attack I've barely kept at bay all day. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath—or as deep as I can out here—and try to fight it back.

In, hold for five seconds, out. In, hold for ten seconds, out. In, hold for five seconds, out. Just like Heather's mom taught me. Dr. Blake is a therapist, and she's been giving me tips on how to deal with the anxiety I've been having since my parents died. But I'm not sure her tips are up to combatting all this any more than I am.

Still, I can't stand here frozen forever, like one of the gargoyles staring down at me. Especially not when I can feel Macy's concern even with my eyes closed.

I take one more deep breath and open my eyes again, shooting my cousin a smile I'm far from feeling. "Fake it till you make it is still a thing, right?"

"It's going to be okay," she tells me, her own eyes wide with sympathy. "Just stand there and catch your breath. I'll carry your suitcases up to the door."

"I can do it."

"Seriously, it's okay. Just chill for a minute." She holds up her hand in the universal *stop* gesture. "We're not in any hurry."

Her tone begs me not to argue, so I don't. Especially since the panic attack I'm trying to fend off is only making it harder to breathe. Instead, I nod and watch as she carries my suitcases—

one at a time—up to the school’s front door.

As I do, a flash of color way above us catches my eye.

It’s there and gone so fast that even as I scan for it, I can’t be sure it ever really existed to begin with. Except—there it is again. A flash of red in the lit window of the tallest tower.

I don’t know who it is or why they even matter, but I stop where I am. Watching. Waiting. Wondering if whoever it is will make another appearance.

It isn’t long before they do.

I can’t see clearly—distance, darkness, and the distorted glass of the windows cover up a lot—but I get the impression of a strong jaw, shaggy dark hair, a red jacket against a background of light.

It’s not much, and there’s no reason for it to have caught my attention—certainly no reason for it to have *held* my attention—and yet I find myself staring up at the window so long that Macy has all three of my suitcases at the top of the stairs before I even realize it.

“Ready to try again?” she calls down from her spot near the front doors.

“Oh, yeah. Of course.” I start up the last thirty or so steps, ignoring the way my head is spinning. Altitude sickness—one more thing I never had to worry about in San Diego.

Fantastic.

I glance up at the window one last time, not surprised at all to find that whoever was looking down at me is long gone. Still, an inexplicable shiver of disappointment works its way through me. It makes no sense, though, so I shrug it off. I have bigger things to worry about right now.

“This place is unbelievable,” I tell my cousin as she pushes open one of the doors and we walk inside.

And holy crap—I thought the whole castle thing with its

pointed archways and elaborate stonework was imposing from the outside. Now that I've seen the inside... Now that I've seen the inside, I'm pretty sure I should be curtsying right about now. Or at least bowing and scraping. I mean, wow. Just...wow.

I don't know where to look first—at the high ceiling with its elaborate black crystal chandelier or the roaring fireplace that dominates the whole right wall of the foyer.

In the end I go with the fireplace, because *heat*. And because it's freaking gorgeous, the mantel around it an intricate pattern of stone and stained glass that reflects the light of the flames through the whole room.

"Pretty cool, huh?" Macy says with a grin as she comes up behind me.

"Totally cool," I agree. "This place is..."

"Magic. I know." She wiggles her brows at me. "Want to see some more?"

I really do. I'm still far from sold on the Alaskan boarding school thing, but that doesn't mean I don't want to check out the castle. I mean, it's a *castle*, complete with stone walls and elaborate tapestries I can't help but want to stop and look at as we make our way through the entryway into some kind of common room.

The only problem is that the deeper we move into the school, the more students we come across. Some are standing around in scattered clumps, talking and laughing, while others are seated at several of the room's scarred wooden tables, leaning over books or phones or laptop screens. In the back corner of one room, sprawled out on several antique-looking couches in varying hues of red and gold, is a group of six guys playing Xbox on a huge TV, while a few other students crowd around to watch.

Only, as we get closer, I realize they aren't watching the video game. Or their books. Or even their phones. Instead, they're all

looking at *me* as Macy leads—and by leads, I mean parades—me through the center of the room.

My stomach clenches, and I duck my head to hide my very obvious discomfort. I get that everyone wants to check out the new girl—especially when she’s the headmaster’s niece—but understanding doesn’t make it any easier to bear the scrutiny from a bunch of strangers. Especially since I’m pretty sure I have the worst case of helmet hair ever recorded.

I’m too busy avoiding eye contact and regulating my breathing to talk as we make our way through the room, but as we exit into a long, winding hallway, I finally tell Macy, “I can’t believe you go to school here.”

“We *both* go to school here,” she reminds me with a quick grin.

“Yeah, but...” I just got here. And I’ve never felt more out of place in my life.

“But?” she repeats, eyebrows arched.

“It’s a lot.” I eye the gorgeous stained glass windows that run along the exterior wall and the elaborate carved molding that decorates the arched ceiling.

“It is.” She slows down until I catch up. “But it’s home.”

“Your home,” I whisper, doing my best not to think of the house I left behind, where my mother’s front porch wind chimes and whirligigs were the most wild-and-crazy thing about it.

“*Our* home,” she answers as she pulls out her phone and sends a quick text. “You’ll see. Speaking of which, my dad wants me to give you a choice about what kind of room situation you want.”

“Room situation?” I repeat, glancing around the castle while images of ghosts and animated suits of armor slide through my head.

“Well, all the single rooms have been assigned for this term. Dad told me we could move some people around to get you one, but I really hoped you might want to room with me instead.”

She smiles hopefully for a second, but it quickly fades as she continues. “I mean, I totally get that you might need some space to yourself right now after...”

And there’s that fade-out again. It gets to me, just like it does every time. Usually, I ignore it, but this time I can’t stop myself from asking, “After what?”

Just this once, I want someone else to say it. Maybe then it will feel more real and less like a nightmare.

Except as Macy gasps and turns the color of the snow outside, I realize it’s not going to be her. And that it’s unfair of me to expect it to be.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, and now it almost looks like she’s going to cry, which, no. Just no. We’re not going to go there. Not when the only thing currently holding me together is a snarky attitude and my ability to compartmentalize.

No way am I going to risk losing my grip on either. Not here, in front of my cousin and anybody else who might happen to pass by. And not now, when it’s obvious from all the stares that I’m totally the newest attraction at the zoo.

So instead of melting into Macy for the hug I so desperately need, instead of letting myself think about how much I miss home and my parents and my *life*, I pull back and give her the best smile I can manage. “Why don’t you show me to *our* room?”

The concern in her eyes doesn’t diminish, but the sunshine definitely makes another appearance. “*Our* room? Really?”

I sigh deep inside and kiss my dream of a little peaceful solitude goodbye. It’s not as hard as it should be, but then I’ve lost a lot more in the last month than my own space. “Really. Rooming with you sounds perfect.”

I’ve already upset her once, which is so not my style. Neither is getting someone kicked out of their room. Besides being rude and smacking of nepotism, it also seems like a surefire way to

piiss people off—something that is definitely not on my to-do list right now.

“Awesome!” Macy grins and throws her arms around me for a fast but powerful hug. Then she glances at her phone with a roll of her eyes. “Dad still hasn’t answered my text—he’s the worst about checking his phone. Why don’t you hang out here, and I’ll go get him? I know he wanted to see you as soon as we arrived.”

“I can come with you—”

“Please just sit, Grace.” She points at the ornate French-provincial-style chairs that flank a small chess table in an alcove to the right of the staircase. “I’m sure you’re exhausted and I’ve got this, honest. Relax a minute while I get Dad.”

Because she’s right—my head is aching and my chest still feels tight—I just nod and plop down in the closest chair. I’m beyond tired and want nothing more than to lean my head back against the chair and close my eyes for a minute. But I’m afraid I’ll fall asleep if I do. And no way am I running the risk of being the girl caught drooling all over herself in the hallway on her very first day...or ever, for that matter.

More to keep myself from drifting off than out of actual interest, I pick up one of the chess pieces in front of me. It’s made of intricately carved stone, and my eyes widen as I realize what I’m looking at. A perfect rendition of a vampire, right down to the black cape, frightening snarl, and bared fangs. It matches the Gothic castle vibe so well that I can’t help being amused. Plus, it’s gorgeously crafted.

Intrigued now, I reach for a piece from the other side. And nearly laugh out loud when I realize it’s a dragon—fierce, regal, with giant wings. It’s absolutely beautiful.

The whole set is.

I put the piece down only to pick up another dragon. This one is less fierce, but with its sleepy eyes and folded wings, it’s

even more intricate. I look it over carefully, fascinated with the level of detail in the piece—everything from the perfect points on the wings to the careful curl of each talon reflects just how much care the artist put into the piece. I’ve never been a chess girl, but this set just might change my mind about the game.

When I put down this dragon piece, I go to the other side of the board and pick up the vampire queen. She’s beautiful, with long, flowing hair and an elaborately decorated cape.

“I’d be careful with that one if I were you. She’s got a nasty bite.” The words are low and rumble and so close that I nearly fall out of my chair. Instead, I jump up, plopping the chess piece down with a clatter, then whirl around—heart pounding—only to find myself face-to-face with the most intimidating guy I’ve ever seen. And not just because he’s hot...although he’s definitely that.

Still, there’s something more to him, something different and powerful and overwhelming, though I don’t have a clue what it is. I mean, sure. He has the kind of face nineteenth-century poets loved to write about—too intense to be beautiful and too striking to be anything else.

Skyscraper cheekbones.

Full red lips.

A jaw so sharp it could cut stone.

Smooth, alabaster skin.

And his eyes...a bottomless obsidian that see everything and show nothing, surrounded by the longest, most obscene lashes I’ve ever seen.

And even worse, those all-knowing eyes are laser-focused on me right now, and I’m suddenly terrified that he can see all the things I’ve worked so hard and so long to hide. I try to duck my head, try to yank my gaze from his, but I can’t. I’m trapped by his stare, hypnotized by the sheer magnetism rolling off him in waves.

I swallow hard to catch my breath.

It doesn't work.

And now he's grinning, one corner of his mouth turning up in a crooked little smile that I feel in every single cell. Which only makes it worse, because that smirk says he knows exactly what kind of effect he's having on me. And, worse, that he's enjoying it.

Annoyance flashes through me at the realization, melting the numbness that's surrounded me since my parents' deaths. Waking me from the stupor that's the only thing that's kept me from screaming all day, every day, at the unfairness of it all. At the pain and horror and helplessness that have taken over my whole life.

It's not a good feeling. And the fact that it's this guy—with the smirk and the face and the cold eyes that refuse to relinquish their hold on me even as they demand that I don't look too closely—just pisses me off more.

It's that anger that finally gives me the strength to break free of his gaze. I rip my eyes away, then search desperately for something else—anything else—to focus on.

Unfortunately, he's standing right in front of me, so close that he's blocking my view of anything else.

Determined to avoid his eyes, I look anywhere but. And land instead on his long, lean body. Then really wish I hadn't, because the black jeans and T-shirt he's wearing only emphasize his flat stomach and hard, well-defined biceps. Not to mention the double-wide shoulders that are absolutely responsible for blocking my view in the first place.

Add in the thick, dark hair that's worn a little too long, so that it falls forward into his face and skims low across his insane cheekbones, and there's nothing to do but give in. Nothing to do but admit that—obnoxious smirk or not—this boy is sexy as hell.

A little wicked, a lot wild, and *all* dangerous.

What little oxygen I've been able to pull into my lungs in this high altitude completely disappears with the realization. Which only makes me madder. Because, seriously. When exactly did I become the heroine in some YA romance? The new girl swooning over the hottest, most unattainable boy in school?

Gross. And so not happening.

Determined to nip whatever this is in the bud, I force myself to look at his face again. This time, as our gazes meet and clash, I realize that it doesn't matter if I'm acting like some giant romantic cliché.

Because he isn't.

One glance and I know that this dark boy with the closed-off eyes and the fuck-you attitude isn't the hero of anyone's story. Least of all mine.

3

Vampire Queens Aren't the Only Ones with a Nasty Bite

Determined not to let this staring contest that feels a little like a show of dominance go on any longer, I cast around for something to break the tension. And settle on a response to the only thing he's actually said to me so far.

"Who's got a nasty bite?"

He reaches past me and picks up the piece I dropped, holds the queen for me to see. "She's really not very nice."

I stare at him. "She's a chess piece."

His obsidian eyes gleam back. "Your point?"

"My point is, she's a *chess* piece. She's made of *marble*. She can't bite anyone."

He inclines his head in a *you never know* gesture. "'There are more things in heaven and hell, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.'"

"Earth," I correct before I can think better of it.

He crooks one midnight-black brow in question, so I continue. "The quote is, 'There are more things in heaven and *earth*, Horatio.'"

"Is it now?" His face doesn't change, but there's something mocking in his tone that wasn't there before, like I'm the one who

made the mistake, not him. But I know I'm right—my AP English class just finished reading *Hamlet* last month, and my teacher spent forever on that quote. "I think I like my version better."

"Even though it's wrong?"

"Especially because it's wrong."

I have no idea what I'm supposed to say to that, so I just shake my head. And wonder how lost I'll get if I go looking for Macy and Uncle Finn right now. Probably very, considering the size of this place, but I'm beginning to think I should risk it. Because the longer I stand here, the more I realize this guy is as terrifying as he is intriguing.

I'm not sure which is worse. And I'm growing less sure by the second that I want to find out.

"I need to go." I force the words past a jaw I didn't even know I'd been clenching.

"Yeah, you do." He takes a small step back, nods toward the common room Macy and I just walked through. "The door's that way."

It's not the response I'm expecting, and it throws me off guard. "So what, I shouldn't let it hit me on the way out?"

He shrugs. "As long as you leave this school, it doesn't matter to me if it hits you or not. I warned your uncle you wouldn't be safe here, but he obviously doesn't like you much."

Anger flashes through me at his words, burning away the last of the numbness that has plagued me. "Who exactly are you supposed to be anyway? Katmere's very own unwelcome wagon?"

"Unwelcome wagon?" His tone is as obnoxious as his face. "Believe me, this is the nicest greeting you're going to get here."

"This is it, huh?" I raise my brows, spread my arms out wide. "The big welcome to Alaska?"

"More like, welcome to hell. Now get the fuck out."

The last is said in a snarl that yanks my heart into my throat.

But it also slams my temper straight into the stratosphere. “Is it that stick up your ass that makes you such a jerk?” I demand. “Or is this just your regular, charming personality?”

The words come out fast and furious, before I even know I’m going to say them. But once they’re out, I don’t regret them. How can I when shock flits across his face, finally erasing that annoying smirk of his?

At least for a minute. Then he fires back, “I’ve got to say, if that’s the best you’ve got, I give you about an hour.”

I know I shouldn’t ask, but he looks so smug, I can’t help myself. “Before what?”

“Before something eats you.” He doesn’t say it, but the *obviously* is definitely implied. Which only pisses me off more.

“Seriously? That’s what you decided to go with?” I roll my eyes. “Bite me, dude.”

“Nah, I don’t think so.” He looks me up and down. “I’m pretty sure you wouldn’t even make an appetizer.”

But then he’s stepping closer, leaning down until he’s all but whispering in my ear. “Maybe a quick snack, though.” His teeth close with a loud, sharp snap that makes me jump and shiver all at the same time.

Which I hate...so, so much.

I glance around us, curious if anyone else is witnessing this mess. But where everyone only had eyes for me earlier, they seem to be going out of their way not to glance in my direction now. One lanky boy with thick red hair even keeps his head so awkwardly turned to the side while walking across the room that he almost runs into another student.

Which tells me everything I need to know about this guy.

Determined to regain control of the situation—and myself—I take a big step back. Then, ignoring my pounding heart and the pterodactyls flapping around in my stomach, I demand, “What

is *wrong* with you?” I mean, seriously. He’s got the manners of a rabid polar bear.

“Got a century or three?” His smirk is back—he’s obviously proud of getting to me—and for a moment, just a moment, I think about how satisfying it would be to punch him right in the center of that annoying mouth of his.

“You know what? You really don’t have to be such a—”

“Don’t tell me what I have to be. Not when you don’t have a clue what you’ve wandered into here.”

“Oh no!” I do a mock-afraid face. “Is this the part of the story where you tell me about the big, bad monsters out here in the big, bad Alaskan wilderness?”

“No, this is the part of the story where I show you the big, bad monsters right here in this castle.” He steps forward, closing the small distance I managed to put between us.

And there goes my heart again, beating like a caged bird desperate to escape.

I hate it.

I hate that he’s bested me, and I hate that being this close to him makes me feel a bunch of things I shouldn’t for a guy who has been a total jerk to me. I hate even more that the look in his eyes says he knows exactly how I’m feeling.

The fact that I’m reacting so strongly to him when all he seems to feel for me is contempt is humiliating, so I take one trembling step back. Then I take another. And another.

But he follows suit, moving one step forward for every step I take backward, until I’m caught between him and the chess table pressing into the back of my thighs. And even though there’s nowhere to go, even though I’m stuck right here in front of him, he leans closer still, *gets* closer still, until I can feel his warm breath on my cheek and the brush of his silky black hair against my skin.

“What are—?” What little breath I’ve managed to recover

catches in my throat. “What are you doing?” I demand as he reaches past me.

He doesn’t answer at first. But when he pulls away, he’s got one of the dragon pieces in his hand. He holds it up for me to see, that single eyebrow of his arched provocatively, and answers. “You’re the one who wanted to see the monsters.”

This one is fierce, eyes narrowed, talons raised, mouth open to show off sharp, jagged teeth. But it’s still just a chess piece. “I’m not afraid of a three-inch dragon.”

“Yeah, well, you should be.”

“Yeah, well, I’m *not*.” The words come out more strangled than I intend, because he may have taken a step back, but he’s still standing too close. So close that I can feel his breath on my cheek and the warmth radiating from his body. So close that one deep breath will end with my chest pressing against his.

The thought sets off a whole new kaleidoscope of butterflies deep inside me. I can’t move back any farther, but I can *lean* back over the table a little. Which I do—all while those dark, fathomless eyes of his watch my every move.

Silence stretches between us for one...ten...twenty-five seconds before he finally asks, “So if you aren’t afraid of things that go bump in the night, what *are* you afraid of?”

Images of my parents’ mangled car flash through my brain, followed by pictures of their battered bodies. I was the only family they had in San Diego—or anywhere, really, except for Finn and Macy—so I’m the one who had to go to the morgue. I’m the one who had to identify their bodies. Who had to see them all bruised and bloody and broken before the funeral home had a chance to put them back together again.

The familiar anguish wells up inside me, but I do what I’ve been doing for weeks now. I shove it back down. Pretend it doesn’t exist. “Not much,” I tell him as flippantly as I can

manage. “There’s not much to be afraid of when you’ve already lost everything that matters.”

He freezes at my words, his whole body tensing up so much that it feels like he might shatter. Even his eyes change, the wildness disappearing between one blink and the next until only stillness remains.

Stillness and an agony so deep I can barely see it behind the layers and layers of defenses he’s erected.

But I *can* see it. More, I can *feel* it calling to my own pain.

It’s an awful and awe-inspiring feeling at the same time. So awful I can barely stand it. So awe-inspiring that I can’t stop it.

So I don’t. And neither does he.

Instead, we stand there, frozen. Devasted. Connected in a way I can feel but can’t comprehend by our very separate horrors.

I don’t know how long we stay like that, staring into each other’s eyes. Acknowledging each other’s pain because we can’t acknowledge our own.

Long enough for the animosity to drain right out of me.

Long enough for me to see the silver flecks in the midnight of his eyes—distant stars shining through the darkness he makes no attempt to hide.

More than long enough for me to get my rampaging heart under control. At least until he reaches out and gently takes hold of one of my million curls.

And just that easily, I forget how to breathe again.

Heat slams through me as he stretches out the curl, warming me up for the first time since I opened the door of Philip’s plane in Healy. It’s confusing and overwhelming and I don’t have a clue what to do about it.

Five minutes ago, this guy was being a total douche to me. And now...now I don’t know anything. Except that I need space. And to sleep. And a chance to just breathe for a few minutes.

With that in mind, I bring my hands up and push at his shoulders in an effort to get him to give me a little room. But it's like pushing a wall of granite. He doesn't budge.

At least not until I whisper, "Please."

He waits a second longer, maybe two or three—until my head is muddled and my hands are shaking—before he finally takes a step back and lets the curl go.

As he does, he sweeps a hand through his dark hair. His longish bangs part just enough to reveal a jagged scar from the center of his left eyebrow to the left corner of his mouth. It's thin and white, barely noticeable against the paleness of his skin, but it's there nonetheless—especially if you look at the wicked vee it causes at the end of his dark eyebrow.

It should make him less attractive, should do something—anything—to negate the incredible power of his looks. But somehow the scar only emphasizes the danger, turning him from just another pretty boy with angelic looks into someone a million times more compelling. A fallen angel with a bad-boy vibe for miles...and a million stories to back that vibe up.

Combined with the anguish I just felt inside him, it makes him more...human. More relatable and more devastating, despite the darkness that rolls off him in waves. A scar like this only comes from an unimaginable injury. Hundreds of stitches, multiple operations, months—maybe even years—of recovery. I hate that he suffered like that, wouldn't wish it on anyone, let alone this boy who frustrates and terrifies and excites me all at the same time.

He knows I noticed the scar—I can see it in the way his eyes narrow. In the way his shoulders stiffen and his hands clench into fists. In the way he ducks his head so that his hair falls over his cheek again.

I hate that, hate that he thinks he has to hide something that he should wear as a badge of honor. It takes a lot of strength to

get through something like this, a lot of strength to come out the other side of it, and he should be proud of that strength. Not ashamed of the mark it's left.

I reach out before I make a conscious decision to do so, cup his scarred cheek in my hand.

His dark eyes blaze, and I think he's going to shove me away. But in the end, he doesn't. He just stands there and lets me stroke my thumb back and forth across his cheek—across his scar—for several long moments.

"I'm sorry," I whisper when I can finally get my voice past the painful lump of sympathy in my throat. "This must have hurt horribly."

He doesn't answer. Instead, he closes his eyes, sinks into my palm, takes one long, shuddering breath.

Then he's pulling back, stepping away, putting real distance between us for the first time since he snuck up behind me, which suddenly feels like a lifetime ago.

"I don't understand you," he tells me suddenly, his black-magic voice so quiet that I have to strain to hear him.

"There are more things in heaven and hell, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy," I answer, deliberately using his earlier misquote.

He shakes his head as if trying to clear it. Takes a deep breath, then blows it out slowly. "If you won't leave—"

"I *can't* leave," I interject. "I have nowhere else to go. My parents—"

"Are dead. I know." He smiles grimly. "Fine. If you're not going to leave, then you need to listen to me very, very carefully."

"What do you—?"

"Keep your head down. Don't look too closely at anyone or anything." He leans forward, his voice dropping to a low rumble as he finishes. "And always, *always* watch your back."

4

Shining Armor Is So Last Century

“G race!” My uncle Finn’s voice booms down the hallway, and I turn toward him instinctively. I smile and give him a little wave even though there’s a part of me that feels frozen in place after being on the receiving end of what sounds an awful lot like a warning.

I turn back to confront Mr. Tall, Dark, and Surly, to figure out exactly what it is he thinks I need to be so afraid of—but he’s gone.

I glance around, determined to figure out where he went, but before I can spot him, Uncle Finn is wrapping me in a huge bear hug and lifting me off my feet. I hang on for dear life, letting the comforting scent of him—the same woodsy scent my dad used to have—wash over me.

“I’m so sorry I couldn’t meet you at the airport. A couple of kids got hurt, and I had to take care of things here.”

“Don’t worry about it. Are they okay?”

“They’re fine.” He shakes his head. “Just a couple of idiots being idiots. You know how boys are.”

I start to tell him that I have no idea how boys are—my last encounter is proof of that—but some weird instinct I don’t

understand warns me not to bring up the guy I was just talking to. So I don't. Instead, I laugh and nod along.

"Enough about the duties of a headmaster," he says, pulling me in for another, quicker hug before leaning back to study my face. "How was your trip? And more importantly, how are you?"

"It was long," I tell him. "But it was fine. And I'm okay." The phrase of the day.

"I'm pretty sure 'okay' is a bit of an overstatement." He sighs. "I can only imagine how hard the last few weeks have been for you. I wish I could have stayed longer after the funeral."

"It's fine. The estate company you called took care of almost everything. And Heather and her mom took care of the rest. I swear."

It's obvious that he wants to say more but just as obvious that he doesn't want to get into anything too deep in the middle of the hallway. So in the end, he just nods and says, "Okay, then. I'll leave you to settle in with Macy. But come see me tomorrow morning, and we'll talk about your schedule. Plus, I'll introduce you to our counselor, Dr. Wainwright. I think you'll like her."

Right. Dr. Wainwright. The school counselor who is also a therapist, according to Heather's mom. And not just any therapist. *My* therapist, apparently, since she and my uncle both think I need one. I would argue, but since I've had to work really hard not to cry in the shower every morning for the last month, I figure they might be on to something.

"Okay, sure."

"Are you hungry? I'll have dinner sent up, since you missed it. And there's something we really need to discuss." He narrows his eyes at me, looks me over. "Although...how are you doing with the altitude?"

"I'm okay. Not great, but okay."

"Yeah." He looks me up and down, then harrumphs

sympathetically before turning to Macy. “Make sure she takes a couple of Advil when she gets to your room. And that she drinks plenty of water. I’ll send up some soup and ginger ale. Let’s keep things light tonight, see how you’re doing in the morning.”

“Light” sounds perfect, since even the thought of eating right now makes me want to throw up. “Okay, sure.”

“I’m glad you’re here, Grace. And I promise, things will get easier.”

I nod, because what else am I going to do? I’m not glad I’m here—Alaska feels like the moon right now—but I’m all for things getting easier. I just want to go one day without feeling like shit.

I was hoping tomorrow would be it, but since I met Tall, Dark, and Surly, all I can think about is the way he looked when he told me to leave Katmere. And the way he glowered when I refused. So...probably not.

Figuring we’re done here, I reach for the handle of one of my suitcases. But my uncle says, “Don’t worry about those. I’ll get one of the guys to—” He breaks off and calls down the hallway. “Hey, Flint! Come here and give me a hand, will you?”

Macy makes a sound halfway between a groan and a death rattle as her father starts down the corridor, presumably trying to catch up with this Flint person.

“Come on, let’s go before Dad chases him down.” She grabs two of my suitcases and practically runs for the stairs.

“What’s wrong with Flint?” I ask as I grab my last remaining suitcase and try to keep up with her.

“Nothing! He’s great. Amazing. Also, superhot. He doesn’t need to see us like this.”

I can see how she could think he doesn’t need to see *me* like this, since I’m pretty sure I look half dead. But, “You look great.”

“Um, no. No, I don’t. Now, come on. Let’s get out of—”

“Hey, Mace. Don’t worry about those suitcases. I’ll get them for you.” A deep voice booms from several steps below us, and I turn around just in time to see a guy in ripped jeans and a white T-shirt charging toward me. He’s tall—like, nearly as tall as Tall, Dark, and Surly—and just as muscular. But that’s where the resemblance ends, because everywhere that other guy was dark and cold, this one is light and fire.

Bright-amber eyes that seem to burn from within.

Warm brown skin.

Black afro that looks amazing on him.

And perhaps most interesting of all, there’s a smile in his eyes that is as different from the other guy’s iciness as the stars just outside the windows are from the endless midnight blue of the sky.

“We’ve got them,” Macy says, but he ignores her, bounding up the stairs three at a time.

He stops next to me first, gently eases the handle of my suitcase from the near death grip I’ve got on it. “Hey there, New Girl. How are you?”

“I’m okay, just...”

“She’s sick, Flint,” my uncle calls from below. “The altitude is getting to her.”

“Oh, right.” His eyes blaze with sympathy. “That sucks.”

“A little bit, yeah.”

“Well, come on then, New Girl. Climb on my back. I’ll give you a ride up the stairs.”

Just the idea has my stomach revolting even more. “Uh, what? N-No, that’s okay.” I back away from him a little. “I can walk—”

“Come on.” He bends his knees to make it easier for me to grab on to his super-broad shoulders. “You’ve got a long three flights ahead of you.”

They *are* a long three flights, and still I would seriously rather

die than climb on a random stranger's back. "Pretty sure they'll be longer for you if you're carrying me."

"Nah. You're so little, I won't even notice. Now, are you going to get on or am I going to pick you up and toss you over my shoulder?"

"You wouldn't," I tell him.

"Try me," he says with an endearing grin that makes me laugh.

But I'm still not getting on his back. No way is one of the hottest guys at the school going to carry me up these stairs—on his back or over his shoulder. No. Freaking. Way. I don't care how much the altitude is bothering me.

"Thanks for the offer. Really." I give him the best smile I can manage right now. "But I think I'm just going to walk slowly. I'll be fine."

Flint shakes his head. "Stubborn much?" But he doesn't push the issue the way I'm afraid he will. Instead, he asks, "Can I at least help you up the stairs? I'd hate to see you fall down a flight or two on your very first day."

"Help how?" Suspicion has me narrowing my eyes at him.

"Like this." He slides his arm around my waist.

I stiffen at the unexpected contact. "What are you—?"

"This way you can at least lean on me if the steps get to be too much. Deal?"

I start to say *absolutely no deal*, but the laughter in his bright-amber eyes as he looks down at me—expecting me to do just that—has me changing my mind. Well, that and the fact that Uncle Finn and Macy both seem totally fine with the whole thing.

"Okay, fine. Deal," I say with a sigh as the room starts to spin around me. "I'm Grace, by the way."

"Yeah, I know. Foster told us you were coming." He heads toward the stairs, propelling me along with his right arm across my back. "And I'm Flint."

He pauses at the foot of the stairs for a moment, reaching for my bags.

“Oh, don’t worry about the suitcases,” Macy says, her voice about three octaves higher than it normally is. “I can get them.”

“No doubt, Mace.” He winks at her. “But you might as well use me if I’m volunteering.” Then he grabs two of the bags in his left hand and heads up the stairs.

We start out going slowly, thankfully, as I’m struggling to breathe after only a few steps. But before long, we’re moving fast—not because I’ve gotten used to the altitude but because Flint has taken on most of my weight and is basically carrying me up the stairs with an arm around my waist.

I know he’s strong—all those muscles under his shirt definitely aren’t for show—but I can’t believe he’s *this* strong. I mean, he’s carrying two heavy bags *and* me up the stairs, and he isn’t even breathing hard.

We end up beating Macy, who is huffing and puffing her way up the final few steps with my last bag, to the top.

“You can let me down now,” I tell him as I start to squirm away. “Since you pretty much carried me anyway.”

“Just trying to help,” he says with a wiggle of his eyebrows that has me laughing despite my embarrassment.

He lets me down, and I expect him to pull away when my feet are finally back on the ground. Instead, he keeps his arm around my waist and moves me across the landing.

“You can let go,” I say again. “I’m fine now.” But my knees wobble as I say it, another wave of dizziness moving through me.

I try to hide it, but I must do a bad job because the look Flint is giving me goes from amused to concerned in the space of two seconds flat. Then he shakes his head. “Yeah, until you pass out and pitch over the railing. Nope, Headmaster Foster put me in charge of getting you to your room safely and that is

what I'm going to do."

I start to argue, but I'm feeling just unsteady enough that I decide accepting his help might actually be the better part of valor. So I just nod as he turns around and calls to my cousin, "You okay there, Mace?"

"Just great," she gasps, all but dragging my suitcase across the landing.

"Told you I could have taken it," Flint says to her.

"It's not the weight of the suitcase," she snipes back. "It's how fast I had to carry it."

"I've got longer legs." He glances around. "So, which hallway am I taking her to?"

"We're in the North wing," Macy says, pointing to the hallway directly to our left. "Follow me."

Despite all her huffing and puffing, she takes off at a near run, with Flint and me hot on her heels. As we race across the landing, I can't help but be grateful for the supporting arm he's still lending me. I've always thought I was in pretty good shape, but life in Alaska obviously takes fit to a whole new level.

There are four sets of double doors surrounding the landing—all heavy, carved wood—and Macy stops at the set marked North. But before she can reach for the handle, the door flies open so fast that she barely manages to jump back before it hits her.

"Hey, what was that ab—" She breaks off when four guys walk through the door like she's not even there. All four are brooding and sexy as all get out, but I've only got eyes for one of them.

The one from downstairs.

He doesn't have eyes for me, though. Instead, he walks right by—face blank and gaze glacier cold—like I'm not even here.

Like he doesn't even see me, even though he has to skirt me to get by.

Like he didn't just spend fifteen minutes talking to me earlier.

Except...except, as he passes, his shoulder brushes against the side of my arm. Even after everything we said to each other, heat sizzles through me at the contact. And though logic tells me the touch was accidental, I can't shake the idea that he did it on purpose. Any more than I can stop myself from turning to watch him walk away.

Just because I'm angry, I assure myself. Just because I want the chance to tell him off for having disappeared like that.

Macy doesn't say anything to him, or the other guys, and neither does Flint. Instead, they wait for them to be out of the way and then head down the hallway like nothing happened. Like we didn't just get blatantly snubbed.

Flint tightens his warm arm around my waist, and I can't help but wonder why the guy with ice in his veins makes my skin tingle and the one literally lending me his warmth leaves me cold. Looks like my messed-up life is totally messing with my brain as well...

I want to ask who they are—want to ask who *he* is so I finally have a name to go with his insane body and even more insane face—but now doesn't feel like the time. So I keep my mouth shut and concentrate on looking around instead of obsessing over some guy I don't even like.

The North hallway is lined with heavy wooden doors on both sides, most with some kind of decoration hanging on them. Dried roses in the shape of an *X* on one, what looks to be an elaborate set of wind chimes on another, and a ton of bat stickers all over a third. I can't decide if the person living there has dreams of being a chiropterologist or if they are simply a fan of Batman.

Either way, I'm absurdly fascinated by all the decorations—especially the wind chimes, as I can't imagine there's much wind in an indoor hallway—and not at all surprised when Macy stops at the most elaborately adorned door of them all. A garland of

fresh flowers winds its way around the doorframe, and lines of threaded, multicolored crystals fall from the top of the door to the bottom in a fancy kind of beaded curtain.

“Here we are,” Macy says as she throws the door open with a flourish. “Home sweet home.”

Before I can take a step over the threshold, another hot guy dressed entirely in black passes by. And though he pays us no more attention than any of the others did at the North hallway door, the hair on the back of my neck stands up. Because even though I’m sure I’m imagining things, it suddenly feels an awful lot like I’m being watched.

Things Hot Pink and Harry Styles Have in Common

“Which bed is hers?” Flint asks as he propels me over the threshold.

“The one on the right,” Macy answers. Her voice is back to sounding funny, so I glance over my shoulder to make sure she’s okay.

She looks fine, but her eyes are huge, and they keep darting from Flint to the rest of the room and back again. I give her a *what’s up* look, but she just shakes her head in the universal sign for *don’t say ANYTHING*. So I don’t.

Instead, I look around the room I’m going to share with my cousin for the next several months. It takes only a couple of seconds for me to figure out that no matter what she said about being okay with me having my own room, she had planned on me rooming with her all along.

For starters, all her possessions are arranged neatly on one rainbow-colored side of the room. And for another, the spare bed is already made up in—of course—hot-pink sheets and a hot-pink comforter with huge white hibiscus flowers all over it.

“I know you like surfing,” she says, watching me eye the blindingly bright comforter. “I thought you might like something

that reminds you of home.”

That shade of pink reminds me of surfer Barbie more than it reminds me of home, but no way am I going to say that to her. Not when it’s obvious she’s gone out of her way to make me feel comfortable. I appreciate she cared enough to try. “Thanks. It’s really nice.”

“It’s definitely cheerful,” Flint says as he helps me to the bed. The look he gives me is totally tongue-in-cheek, but that only makes me like him more. The fact that he realizes how absurd Macy’s decorating choices are but is way too nice to say anything that might hurt her feelings totally works for me. If I’m lucky, maybe I’ve made another friend.

He drops my suitcases at the foot of the bed, then steps back as I sink onto my mattress, my head still spinning a little.

“Do you guys need anything else before I head out?” Flint asks after we are completely disentangled.

“I’m good,” I tell him. “Thanks for the help.”

“Any time, New Girl.” He flashes me a ten-thousand-kilowatt smile. “Anytime.”

I’m pretty sure Macy whimpers a little at the sight of that grin, but she doesn’t say anything. Just kind of walks to the door and smiles weakly as she waits for him to leave. Which he does with a little wave for me and a fist bump for her on his way out.

The second the door is closed, and locked, behind him, I say, “You’ve got a crush on Flint.”

“I don’t!” she answers, looking wildly at the door, like he can hear us through the thick wood.

“Oh yeah? Then what was all that about?”

“All what?” Her voice is about three octaves too high.

“You know.” I wring my hands, bat my lashes, give a halfway-decent imitation of the sounds she’s been making since her father flagged down Flint for help.

“I don’t sound like that.”

“You totally sound like that,” I tell her. “But I don’t get it. If you like him, why didn’t you try to talk to him more? I mean, it was, like, a perfect opportunity.”

“I don’t *like* him like him. I don’t!” she insists with a laugh when I give her a look. “I mean, yeah, he’s gorgeous and nice and supersmart, but I’ve got a boyfriend who I really care about. It’s just, Flint is so...*Flint*. You know? And he was in our *room, next to your bed*.” She sighs. “The mind boggles.”

“Don’t you mean swoons?” I tease.

“Whatever.” She rolls her eyes. “It’s not a real crush. It’s more like...”

“More like the aura surrounding the most popular boy in school?”

“Yes, that! Exactly that. Except Flint’s not quite that high on the list. Jaxon and his group have the top positions pretty much sewn up.”

“Jaxon?” I ask, trying to sound casual even as my whole body goes on high alert. I don’t know how I know she’s talking about *him*, but I do. “Who’s Jaxon?”

“Jaxon Vega.” She fake swoons. “I have *no* idea how to explain Jaxon, except... Oh, wait! You saw him.”

“I did?” I try to ignore the way flying dinosaurs have once again taken up residence in my stomach.

“Yeah, on the way to our room. He was one of the guys who nearly hit me in the face with the door. The really hot one out in front.”

I play dumb even though my heart is suddenly beating way too fast. “You mean the ones who completely ignored us?”

“Yeah.” She laughs. “Don’t take it personally, though. That’s just the way Jaxon is. He’s...angsty.”

He’s a lot more than angsty, if our conversation a little while

ago is anything to go by. But I'm not about to bring up what happened to Macy when I don't even know how I feel about it yet.

So I do the only thing I can do. I change the subject. "Thanks so much for setting up the room for me. I appreciate it."

"Oh, don't worry about it." She waves it away. "It was no big deal."

"I'm pretty sure it *was* a big deal. I don't know that many companies that deliver ninety minutes outside of Healy, Alaska."

She blushes a little and looks away, like she doesn't want me to know just how much trouble she's gone through to make me feel at home. But then she shrugs and says, "Yeah, well, my dad knows all the ones that do. It wasn't a problem."

"Still, you're totally my favorite cousin."

She rolls her eyes. "I'm your only cousin."

"Doesn't mean you aren't also my favorite."

"My dad uses that line."

"That you're his favorite cousin?" I tease.

"You know what I mean." She sighs in obvious exasperation. "You're a dork; you know that, right?"

"I absolutely do, yes."

She laughs, even as she crosses to the mini fridge next to her desk. "Here, drink this," she says as she pulls out a large bottle of water and tosses it to me. "And I'll show you the rest."

"The rest?"

"Yeah. There's more." She crosses to one of the closets and pulls open the doors. "I figured your wardrobe wasn't exactly equipped for Alaska, so I supplemented a little."

"*A little* is an understatement, don't you think?"

Lined up inside the closet are several black skirts and pants, along with white and black blouses, a bunch of black or purple polo shirts, two black blazers, and two red and black plaid scarves. There are also a bunch of lined hoodies, a few thick

sweaters, a heavy jacket, and two more pairs of snow pants—only a few of which are in hot pink, thankfully. On the floor are a few pairs of new shoes and snow boots, along with a large box of what looks like books and school supplies.

“There are socks and thermal underwear and some fleece shirts and pants in your dresser drawers. I figure moving here is hard enough. I didn’t want you to have to worry about anything extra.”

And just like that, she manages to knock down the first line of my defenses. Tears bloom in my eyes, and I look away, blinking quickly in an effort to hide what a disaster I am.

It obviously doesn’t work, because Macy makes a small exclamation of dismay. She’s across the room in the blink of an eye, pulling me into a coconut-scented hug that seems incongruous here at the center of Alaska. It’s also strangely comforting.

“It sucks, Grace. The whole thing just totally sucks, and I wish I could make it better. I wish I could just wave a wand and put everything back the way it used to be.”

I nod because there’s a lump in my throat. And because there’s nothing else to say. Except that I wish for that, too.

I wish that the last words my parents and I spoke weren’t hurled at each other in a fight that seems so stupid now.

I wish that my dad hadn’t lost control of the car two hours later and driven himself and my mother off a cliff, plunging hundreds of feet into the ocean.

Most of all, I wish that I could smell my mother’s perfume or hear the deep rumble of my father’s voice just one more time.

I let Macy hug me as long as I can stand it—which is only about five seconds or so—and then I pull away. I’ve never particularly liked being touched, and it’s only gotten worse since my parents died.

“Thanks for—” I gesture to the bed and closet. “All of this.”

“Of course. And I want you to know, if you ever need to talk or whatever, I’m here. I know it’s not the same, because my mom left; she didn’t die.” She swallows hard, takes a deep breath before continuing. “But I know what it’s like to feel alone. And I’m a good listener.”

It’s the first time she’s actually used the word “die.” The first time she’s actually acknowledged what happened to my parents by name. The fact that she has makes it so much easier to say, “Thank you,” and mean it, even as I remember that Jaxon didn’t shy away from it, either. He might have been a jackass all the way around, but he called my parents’ death what it was. And didn’t treat me like I was going to shatter under the weight of one harsh word.

Maybe that’s why I’m still thinking about him when I should be writing him off for the jerk he is.

She nods, watching me out of worried eyes that only make me feel worse.

“I should probably get unpacked.” I look down at my suitcases with distaste. It feels like I just packed them. The last thing I want to do is empty them right now. Not when my electric-pink bed is calling me like a beacon.

“I can totally help with that.” She points at a door across the room. “Why don’t you go take a shower and get into your pajamas? I’ll check on the soup my dad said he sent up. Then you can eat, take some Advil, and get some rest. Hopefully, when you wake up, you’ll be better acclimated to the altitude.”

“That sounds...” I really do feel crappy, and a shower sounds amazing. As does sleep, considering I’ve been so nervous about the move that I haven’t gotten much in the last week or so.

“Perfect, right?” She fills in the blank.

“It really does, yeah.”

“Good.” She walks to her closet and pulls out a couple extra towels. “If you want to hop in the shower, I’ll get you some warm soup and hopefully, in half an hour, this whole day will feel a lot better.”

“Thanks, Macy.” I turn to look at her. “I mean it.”

A grin splits her face and lights up her eyes. “You’re welcome.”

Fifteen minutes later, I’m out of the shower and dressed in my favorite pair of pajamas—a Harry Styles T-shirt from his first solo tour and a pair of blue fleece pants with white and yellow daisies all over them—only to find Macy dancing around the room to “Watermelon Sugar.”

Talk about kismet.

Macy oohs and aahs over the concert tee—as she should—but other than that, she pretty much leaves me alone. Except to make sure I drink an entire thirty-two-ounce bottle of water *and* take the Advil she left on my nightstand.

There’s a bowl of chicken noodle soup on my nightstand, too, but right now I don’t have the energy to eat. Instead, I climb into bed and pull the hot-pink covers over my head.

The last thing I think about before drifting off to sleep is that—despite everything—tonight is the first time I’ve taken a shower without struggling not to cry since my parents died.

6

No, I Really Don't Want to Build a Snowman

I wake up slowly, head fuzzy and body as heavy as stone. It takes me a second to remember where I am—Alaska—and that the light snores that fill the room belong to Macy and not Heather, whose room I crashed in for the last three weeks.

I sit up, trying to ignore the unfamiliar howls and roars—and even the occasional animalistic scream—in the distance. It's enough to freak anyone out, let alone a girl born and raised in the city, but I comfort myself by remembering there's a giant castle wall between me and all the animals making those noises...

Still, if I'm being honest, it isn't the utter foreignness of this place that has my brain racing overtime. Yes, being in Alaska is bizarre on what feels like every level. But once I banish thoughts of my old life, it isn't Alaska that woke me up at—I glance at the clock—3:23 in the morning. And it's not Alaska that's keeping me awake.

It's him.

Jaxon Vega.

I don't know anything more about him than I did when he left me standing in the hallway, angry and confused and hurting more than I want to admit—except that he's the most popular guy

at Katmere Academy. And that he's angsty, which...no kidding. I didn't exactly need a crystal ball to guess that.

But seriously, nothing Macy told me matters, because I've decided I don't want to know any more about him.

More, I don't want to know *him*.

Yet when I close my eyes, I can still see him so perfectly. His clenched jaw. The thin scar that runs the length of his face. The black ice of his eyes that lets me see for a second—just a second—that he knows as much about pain as I do. Maybe more.

It's that pain I think of most as I sit here in the dark. That pain that makes me worry for him when I shouldn't give a damn one way or the other.

I wonder how he got that scar. However it happened, it had to have been awful. Terrifying. Traumatic. Devastating.

I figure that's probably why he was so cold to me. Why he tried to get me to leave and, when I wouldn't, ended up delivering that ridiculous and—I admit, mildly disconcerting—warning.

Macy said he was angsty...does that mean he treats everyone the way he treated me? And if so, why? Because he's just a jerk? Or because he's in so much pain that the only way he can handle it is to make everyone afraid of him so that he can keep them at a distance? Or do people see his scar and his scowl and decide to keep their distance all on their own?

It's an awful thought but one I can totally relate to. Not the *people being afraid of me* part but definitely the *people keeping their distance* part. Except for Heather, most of my old friends drifted away after my parents died. Heather's mom told me it was because my parents' deaths reminded them of their own mortality, reminded them that their parents could die at any time. And so could they.

Logically, I knew she was right, that they were just trying to protect themselves the only way they knew how. But that didn't

make the distance any less painful. And it definitely didn't make the loneliness any easier to bear.

Reaching for my phone, I shoot off a couple of quick texts to Heather—which I should have done as soon as I got here last night—telling her that I'm safe and explaining about the altitude sickness.

Then I lay back down, try to will myself to go back to sleep. But I'm wide-awake now, thoughts of Alaska and school and Jaxon blurring together in my head until all I want is for them to just stop.

But they don't stop, and suddenly my heart is pounding, my skin prickling with awareness. I press a hand to my chest, take a couple of deep breaths, try to figure out what has me so alarmed that I can barely breathe.

And suddenly it's right there. All the thoughts I'd shoved aside for the past forty-eight hours, just to get through leaving. Just to get here. My parents, leaving San Diego and my friends, that ridiculous airplane ride into Healy. Macy's expectations for our friendship, the way Jaxon looked at me and then *didn't* look at me, the things he said to me. The ridiculous amount of clothes I have to wear here to keep warm. The fact that I'm essentially trapped in this castle by the cold...

It all kind of melds together into one great big carousel of fear and regret, whirling through my brain. No thoughts are clear, no images stand out from any of the others—only an overwhelming feeling of impending doom.

The last time I freaked out like this, Heather's mom told me that experiencing too powerful emotions is completely normal after a huge loss. The crushing weight on my chest, the swirling thoughts, the shaking hands, the feeling that the world is going to come crashing in on me—all completely normal. She's a therapist, so she should know, but it doesn't feel normal right now.

It feels terrifying.

I know I should stay where I am—this castle is gigantic, and I have no idea where anything is—but I’m smart enough to know if I stay here staring at the ceiling, I’m going to end up having a full-blown panic attack. So instead, I take a deep breath and heave myself out of bed. I slip my feet into my shoes and grab my hoodie on my way out the door.

Back home, I’d go for a run when I couldn’t sleep, even if it was three in the morning. But here, that’s out of the question. Not just because it’s as cold as death outside but because God only knows what wild animal is waiting for me in the middle of the night. I haven’t been lying in bed listening to the roars and howls for the last half an hour for nothing.

But it’s a big castle with long hallways. I may not be able to run through them, but I can at least go exploring for a while. See what I find.

I carefully close the door behind me—the last thing I want to do is wake Macy up when she’s been so nice to me—then head down the hallway toward the stairs.

It’s creepier than I expect it to be. I would have thought the hallways would be lit up in the middle of the night, safety protocols and all that, but instead they’re dim. Like *just enough light to see imaginary shadows sweeping along the corridors* dim.

For a second, I think about going back into my room and forgetting about the whole walk/explore-the-castle thing. But just the thought has the merry-go-round starting in my brain again, and that’s the last thing I can handle right now.

I pull out my phone and angle its flashlight down the hall. Suddenly the shadows disappear, and it looks like any other hallway. If you discount the rough stone walls and old-fashioned tapestries, I mean.

I have no idea where I’m going, only that I want to get off the

dorm floor. I can barely stand the thought of dealing with *Macy* right now—dealing with anyone else seems blatantly impossible.

I make it to the long, circular staircase without a problem and take the steps two at a time, all the way down to the ground floor. After my shower last night, *Macy* mentioned that's where the cafeteria is, along with a number of the classrooms. There are other classrooms in buildings around the grounds, but most of the core classes are taught here, inside the castle, which I am all for. The less I have to be out in that weather, the better.

Down here, the hallways are lined with more tapestries, worn and faded with age. My favorite stretches for yards and is vividly colorful. Purples and pinks, greens and yellows, all woven together with no apparent rhyme or reason—except as I step back and shine my flashlight on a wider swath of it, I realize there *is* a pattern. This is an artistic rendering of the aurora borealis—the northern lights.

I've always wanted to see them, and somehow, in all the pain and worry about moving to Alaska, I totally forgot that I'll pretty much have a front-row seat out here.

It's that thought that galvanizes me, that has me walking back toward the entryway and the giant set of double doors that lead to the front courtyard. I'm not foolish enough to go traipsing around in the snow in my hoodie and pajama bottoms, but maybe I can stick my head out, see if I can find any lights in the sky.

It's probably a bad idea—I should just head back up to bed and save the aurora borealis for another night—but now that it's in my brain, I can't shake it. My dad used to tell me stories about the northern lights, and they've always been a bucket list item for me. Now that I'm this close, I can't *not* take a look.

I use my flashlight to negotiate my way back down the hall. Once there, I hold it up so I can unlock the doors, but before I can do more than locate the first one, both doors fly open. And

in walk two guys wearing nothing but old-school concert T-shirts, jeans, and lace-up boots. No jackets, no sweaters, no hoodies, even. Just ripped jeans, Mötley Crüe, and Timberlands. It's the most ridiculous thing I've ever seen, and for a second, I can't help wondering if this castle—like Hogwarts—comes equipped with its very own ghosts. Ones who died at an eighties rock concert.

"Well, well, well. Looks like we made it back just in time," says the taller of the two guys. He's got warm copper skin, dark hair tied back in a ponytail, and a black nose ring right through his septum. "What are you doing out of bed, Grace?"

Something in his voice has nervous goose bumps prickling along my skin. "How do you know my name?"

He laughs. "You're the new girl, aren't you? Everybody knows *your* name. *Grace*." He takes a step closer, and I would swear he was sniffing me, which is completely bizarre. And also not ghostlike behavior at all. "Now, how about you answer my question? What are you doing out of bed?"

I don't tell him about the northern lights—especially since I get a glimpse of the sky before he closes the door and it's just the regular black sprinkled with stars you can see almost anywhere in the world. Just one more disappointment in a long string of them lately.

"I was thirsty," I lie badly, wrapping my arms around my waist in an effort to combat the cold gust of wind that came in with them and still lingers in the air around us. "Just wanted to get some water."

"And did you find any?" says the second guy. He's shorter than the first and stockier, too. His blond hair is shaved close against his scalp.

It seems like an innocuous enough question, except he's walking toward me as he asks it, getting into my personal space until I have to decide whether to stand my ground or back up.

I decide to back up, mostly because I don't like the way he's looking at me. And because each step I take gets me closer to the stairs and—hopefully—my room.

"I did, thanks," I lie again, trying to sound unconcerned. "I'm just going to head back to bed now."

"Before we even have a chance to get to know you? That doesn't seem very polite, does it, Marc?" the short-haired one asks.

"It doesn't, no," Marc answers, and now he's really close, too. "Especially since Foster's been up our asses about you for weeks now."

"What does that mean?" I demand, forgetting to be afraid for a second.

"It means we've had three different meetings about you, all warning us to be on our best behavior. It's annoying as hell. Right, Quinn?"

"Absolutely. If he's that worried about you being here, I don't know why he didn't just leave you wherever you came from." Quinn reaches out, yanks one of my curls—hard. I want to pull away, want to shove him back and yell at him to leave me alone.

But there's trouble here. I can feel it, just like I can feel the barely leashed violence rolling off these guys in waves. It's like they're desperate to hurt someone, desperate to rip someone apart. I don't want that someone to be me.

"What do you think, Grace?" Marc sneers. "You think you can handle Alaska? Because I'm pretty sure it's going to naturally unselect you pretty damn quick."

"I'm just...trying to get by until graduation. I don't want any trouble." I can barely force the words out of my tight throat.

"Trouble?" Quinn laughs, but the sound is completely devoid of humor. "Do we look like trouble to you?"

They look like the very definition of trouble.

Like, if I looked trouble up in the dictionary, their pictures would be right there, front and center, along with a giant warning stamp. I don't say that, though. I don't say anything, actually, as my brain races to figure a way out of this terrifying situation. Part of me thinks I must be dreaming, because this feels like a scene out of every teen movie ever, where the school bullies decide to gang up on the new kid just to show her who's boss.

But this is real life, not the movies, and I have no delusions that I'm the boss out here or anywhere. I want to tell them that, but right now answering feels like acquiescence, and that's the last thing you're supposed to do when dealing with a bully. The more you give them, the more they try to take.

"So tell me, Grace. Have you had a chance to see the snow yet?" Marc asks, and suddenly he's way too close for comfort. "I bet you've never even seen snow before."

"I saw plenty of snow on the way up here."

"On the back of a snowmobile? That doesn't count, does it, Quinn?"

"No." Quinn shakes his head with a snarl that shows an awful lot of teeth. "You definitely need to get closer. Show us what you can do."

"What I can do?" I have no idea what they're talking about.

"I mean, it's obvious you've got *something* going on." This time, when he breathes in, I'm sure Marc is smelling me. "I just can't quite figure out what it is, yet."

"Right?" Quinn agrees. "Me neither, but there's definitely something there. So let's see what you've got, *Grace*."

He shifts, braces himself, and that's when it hits me. What they're planning on doing. And just how much danger I'm really in.